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NATIONAL STANDARDIZATION: OFFICE TREATMENT OF NAMES

Report on the Standardization of Geographical Names in China

Paper submitted by China**

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THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN CHINA

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Because of China's long history and numerous ethnic groups, the assignment, writing and romanization of its geographical names, as well as the Han-character transcription of Chinese and foreign geographical names, are very complex. As a result, the work of standardizing geographical names in China is relatively difficult. In the light of the substantive circumstances, the general criteria for standardizing a given geographical name are as follows: it should be written according to the norms of correct spelling and pronunciation (whether in Han characters, the characters of minority language scripts, the Roman alphabet, or the Hanyu Pinyin phonetic alphabet (Pinyin)); it should carry no unsound connotations; its assignment or change should follow the approval process prescribed by law; (if translated,) its translation should adhere to the criteria of the national standardization scheme; and it should be transcribed on the basis of standard pronunciation (or according to generally accepted pronunciation if a standard pronunciation does not exist).

I. FORMULATION OF LEGAL NORMS AND STANDARDS FOR THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Legal regulations and standards for geographical names are the foundation and guarantee for achieving the standardization of geographical names. Not only should the norms and standards for assigning, changing and writing geographical names be uniform, but there should also be definite norms and standards for transcribing domestic and foreign names in different languages, as well as for assigning, changing and transcribing substantive geographical names in international territories such as the oceans, Antarctica and so on. With regard to the administration of geographical names in China, the Chinese authorities have issued the Diming guanli tiaoli (Administrative Regulations for Geographical Names) and Diming guanli tiaoli shishi xize (Guidelines for Implementing Administrative Regulations for Geographical Names). In the area of technical norms, they have drawn up the Zhongguo diming Hanyu pinyin zimu pinxie guize (Hanyu bufen) (Principles of Pinyin Romanization of Chinese Geographical Names (Han-language Section)), Zhongguo diming xinxi xitong jishu guifan (shixing) (Technical Norms for Chinese Toponymic Information Systems (Trial Implementation)), Waiguo diming Hanzi yixie tongze (shixing) (General Principles for Han-character Transcription of Foreign Geographical Names (Trial Implementation) and Ying/fa/de/o/xi(banya)/a(labo) liuzhong yiming guize (Principles of Transliterating English, French, German, Spanish and Arabic

Names), along with phonetic transcription tables for 50 of the world's languages; a number of other documentary guidelines have been prepared as well. The establishment of legal norms for Chinese geographical names has thus been put on a relatively sound basis; henceforth, attention will turn to the drafting of a comprehensive system of technical standards for toponymic terminology, transcription, usage, assignment and change, transliteration, computerization, information systems, signage, codes and reference works. Each of these standards can be subdivided into several subsidiary standards.

II. CRITERIA FOR ASSIGNING AND CHANGING GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

The assignment and changing of geographical names are at the crux of toponymic standardization. To qualify as a standardized, Government-sanctioned geographical term, a toponym must meet the criteria of written simplicity, name stability, and adherence to the norms of general usage, and must also undergo a specific approval process.

1. Basic principles for assigning geographical names

According to the provisions of the Guidelines for Implementing Administrative Regulations for Geographical Names, the assignment of toponyms in China must:

(a) Enhance national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity;

(b) Reflect local human or natural geographical features;

(c) Employ standard Han or minority-language characters;

(d) Avoid the use of foreign persons' or place names;

(e) Avoid duplicating the names of administrative divisions at the county level and above for places which do not contain the seats of the local People's Governments.

- The names of neighbourhood committee offices in townships and small towns within the same county, city or district, the names of natural villages within the same township, and the names of streets, lanes and residential districts within the same town should not be duplicated;

- The substantive names of famous Chinese gecgraphical features should not be duplicated;

- The names of provinces, autonomous regions and cities directly

administered by the central authority, as well as those of the more important local features of the natural geography, should not be duplicated.

- The use of homophonous characters should also be avoided for toponyms covered under the foregoing framework.

(f) The substantive names of famous geographical features such as mountain ranges, rivers etc. should not be used as the proper names of administrative divisions, nor should the names of natural geographical entities whose scope exceeds that of the administrative division concerned.

(g) The name of a county, city or municipally-administered district cannot duplicate that of a village or town that is not the seat of that administrative division's People's Government.

(h) The offices of local committees for townships, small towns and neighbourhoods should generally be named after the townships or small towns in which the local People's Government has its seat, or the streets in which those offices are located.

(i) Newly-built or relocated urban streets and residential districts should be named according to the appropriate administrative level, construction order and name standardization criteria.

2. Basic principles for changing geographical names

(a) Changing toponyms that violate general and specific national policies:

All toponyms that impair Chinese territorial sovereignty and national dignity, that are ethnically discriminatory in nature, that hinder national unity, that are extremely vulgar, that insult the working people or otherwise violate general and specific national policies should be changed.

(b) Within a given area or region, names in the same geographical category should not be duplicated. In principle, all toponyms that violate the name-assignment provisions of item 1 (e) above should be changed. However, such changes should proceed in accordance with the development needs of cities and towns, and should be implemented gradually.

(c) Names of all offices of local Government at the township or small-

town level should be made uniform with those of the seats of those local Governments.

(d) All non-standard, incorrect, traditional complex-form or obscure characters used in geographical names should be changed to standard and more commonly-used characters. Moreover, all characters inappropriate for use in geographical names, or whose pronunciations too closely resemble those of characters with inappropriate connotations, should also be revised.

III. STANDARDIZATION OF GENERAL GEOGRAPHICAL TERMINOLOGY

General geographical terminology comprises the terms used in geographical names to differentiate the various categories to which they belong, and are an essential part of modern standard toponymy. Such terms include the category names for administrative divisions (province, county, city, township etc.) and for substantive features of natural geography (mountain, river, lake, sea and so on). In the Han language such terminology is very complicated, particularly with regard to terms for substantive features of natural geography and for some features of human geography as well. Local variants of general terms are especially numerous, and a single general term can also have several different meanings. This impairs the ability of such terms to convey specific meanings, and the confusion is compounded when the terms are written in roman characters. The standardization and rationalization of general geographical terms are therefore an important part of the work of standardizing geographical names.

IV. ENSURING UNIFORMITY IN WRITING AND SPELLING GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

The success of the standardization of geographical names is manifested in the way such names are written, pronounced and romanized. In other words, the characters used in geographical names must adhere to national norms of character usage, and must not include invented characters, traditional complex-form characters for which simplifications already exist, and variant character-forms which have been officially discarded. The forms of characters used in geographical names must conform to the standards jointly issued in 1965 by the Ministry of Culture and the Committee on Chinese Language Reform in the Yinshua tongyong Hanzi zixingbiao (Table of Han Character Forms for General Use in Printed Materials). Toponyms in minority languages must use the characters and pronunciations determined by the norms for the scripts of those languages. Readings of toponyms having standard pronunciations will follow those standards, while toponyms lacking standard pronunciations will be read according to common usage in the local language. In cases where neither a written version in the local language's script nor an established Han-character version exist, the toponym can be standardized in accordance with the norms for translating names into Han characters. When such toponyms are to be written in the scripts of

other minority languages, their written forms and pronunciations should also be standardized according to the norms for those languages.

The basis for the uniform romanization of Chinese geographical names is the Hanyu pinyin fang'an (Chinese Phonetic Plan). Geographical names in the Han language, and those in minority languages that are written in Han characters, are romanized according to the Zhongguo diming Hanyu pinyin zimu pinxie guize (Hanyu diming bufen) (Principles of Pinyin romanization of Chinese toponyms (Han-language toponym section)). Toponyms in Mongolian, Uygur, Tibetan and other minority languages are romanized according to the Shaoshu minzuyu diming Hanyu pinyin zimu yinyi zhuanxiefa (Methods for Converting Minority-language Geographical Names to Pinyin Romanization). In principle, all Chinese geographical names and general terms appearing on maps published in foreign languages are to be written in Pinyin romanization. However, as a convenience for readers, the general terms for administrative divisions and some natural geographical features may be freely translated, with a table of commonly-used terms appended to the map they appear on. A flexible format involving free translations combined with freely-translated phonetic renderings may be used for Chinese geographical names and general terms appearing in books, newspapers and written documents. The spelling of Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan geographical names will continue to follow established usage in those locations.